

Gay and lesbian youth: Struggling in silence

Community examines needs of sexual minority youth

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

Where public schools, juvenile justice and youth services are concerned, the good word on homosexuality has usually been "hush."

Judy Chambers, substance abuse specialist for Portland Public Schools, knew that. And then the issue began to filter home.

Last Chambers's daughter wanted to write a paper on homosexuality, but the teacher balked. "The teacher challenged her interest in that, saying, 'You're a normal kid. Why are you interested in that?'" and delivered a very clear message to kids who may be struggling with that question," Chambers recalled.

Then, last fall, Chambers met with members of a substance abuse prevention committee of Multnomah County. That group, assigned to consider minority issues, focused only on ethnic minorities and was reluctant to talk about problems facing gay and lesbian adolescents.

"A number of different things have been reminding me of the disproportionate burden sexual minority youth carry," Chambers said. Last December she convened a task force to discuss — and work to reduce — that weight of silence, fear and isolation for gay and lesbian teens.

The task force has earned a tentative go-ahead from Portland Public Schools Superintendent Matthew Prophet. The superintendent, while not making any commitments to specific ideas such as holding sensitivity trainings for staff or adding sexual orientation to the schools' non-discrimination code, did encourage the task force to continue its work and requested a timeline of recommendations.

In an interview, Director of Curriculum Carlos Taylor said that school administrators and staff need more training to work with gay and lesbian students.

"We all need not only to have our sensitivity heightened, but we need to have the skills to help adolescents dealing with these big issues," he said.

In the past, homosexuality has usually been discussed in the schools only in the context of AIDS education and prevention, Taylor said. "It seems so automatic, the assumption that they are one issue. We need to make it clear that they are not."

Members of the Task Force on Adolescent Sexual Minority issues come from various corners. They include representatives from Multnomah County, the school system and the State Commission on Youth, Ecumenical

Ministries of Oregon and the American Friends Service Committee, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, Cascade AIDS Project, the Lesbian Community Project and interested individuals.

Their common goal, reached in a February meeting, is to address the needs of sexual minority youth through three main channels: policies that protect against discrimination, education for the community and services that help young people "develop to their full capacity free from harassment and victimization."

Naming the Issue

The task force's mission statement describes the bleak edge of the picture for gay and lesbian teens. Adolescents who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual suffer disproportionate risk of harassment, suicide, substance abuse, HIV infection, depression, low self-esteem, homelessness, prostitution and sexual exploitation, the statement notes.

Also, they are called names in the hallways. Several task force members said that a walk through the corridors of any secondary school demonstrates the need for their work.

"There's a good deal of name-calling with school-age kids. The names that come up a lot are 'faggot,' 'queer' or 'lezzie,'" said Ron Bloodworth, a student services specialist.

"If kids are called names with respect to race, you feel like you have a lot of policy back-up support," Bloodworth continued. "But homophobic names are not addressed specifically in the discipline code."

Taylor said he would favor policy changes prohibiting students from using sexual epithets. "We ought to do something with our policy so that it's wrong for students to use those kinds of slurs, to talk about gay and lesbian people as if they are less than anyone else. We want to keep that from happening, that kids are called names."

In a draft of recommendations specific to the schools, some advocates of increased support for gay and lesbian students suggested boosting resources on homosexuality in the staff library, planning sensitivity training for administrators and developing lists of materials appropriate for school libraries.

Later steps might include training of health teachers and school medical staff on sexual orientation issues and designating "safe" staff persons in middle and high schools for students who want to talk about questions of sexual identity, according to the draft.

Members of the community task force agree that the education effort should include families, schools, the juvenile justice system and human service providers who work with young people. Educating non-gay youth, as well as teachers, medical providers and counselors will be a critical step toward reducing homophobia, they said.

It will not necessarily be an easy one. Even the language chosen by the task force in its mission statement demonstrates the sensitivity involved in discussing gay and lesbian youth. "Given that the needs of sexual minority youth are inadequately addressed," the statement reads, the task force aims to help such youth "develop according to their own unique characteristics" — wording that group members hope can earn support from almost everyone.

The gathering of the task force itself is a significant step. Merely by meeting and gaining a go-ahead from district officials, the group has burst the first barrier around gay and lesbian adolescent issues — the shell of silence. Its existence draws public attention to problems that gay teens have understood, privately and painfully for years.

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'Not safe' to be out

Julie Baumler, now a student at Lewis and Clark and a member of Windfire, a Portland support group for gay and lesbian youth, joined the task force in the hope of making life easier for current high school students than it was for her.

"When I was 16 and had just come out, my life was utter hell, because there was really nothing for people my age. . . I have a lot of friends who dropped out of high school, and part of the reason they did is because they couldn't stand the harassment and the assumption that everyone's straight," she said.

Within the rigid social code of most high schools, "the feeling is that it's not safe to be anything but closeted," Baumler said.

National statistics echo her observation. A survey by the National Gay Task Force found that 45 percent of gay males and nearly 20 percent of lesbians had suffered verbal or physical assault in secondary schools.

Counselors and researchers point out that gay adolescents face all the common struggles of that age group. They wrestle with identity, with separation from their parents, with romantic and sexual relationships, with concerns about their future. But for gay and lesbian teens, those problems are compounded by society's homophobia.

"High school is such a difficult time for kids who are coming out," said Bonnie Brown, student assistance coordinator at Marshall High School. "Kids are so into defining their roles and so into being accepted. Kids can be cruel, real cruel."

Brown suggested that young lesbians may feel the most isolated. She said that many gay male teenagers are able to form close friendships with heterosexual girls, while lesbians are often rejected by classmates of both sexes.

And while most students can seek advice from teachers, coaches, counselors, clergy or family, gay, lesbian and bisexual students may be so fearful of rejection that they do not disclose their feelings to anyone.

"I haven't had a lot of experience talking to kids [about sexual identity issues] because of not being able to convey the safety they would need to feel," said Chambers. "We need to find all the possible means for communicating safety."

Gay teens, struggling on the fringes of the high school environment, don't always find welcome in the adult gay and lesbian community. Closeted adults can't provide adequate role models, and pervasive myths about "recruitment" of young people make some adult gay men and lesbians reluctant to initiate friendships with teens.

"A lot of older people in the community are scared stiff to talk to young people," said Baumler. "And that's what we all need the most — people who are gay and who are willing to admit that to someone who's under 18."

The same reluctance — exacerbated by fears of losing their jobs — affects gay and lesbian teachers and counselors, as well as those who would like to support gay students but hesitate to raise the issue. Others alienate students through their unconscious use of language that excludes gay men and lesbians — for instance, assuming that partners are heterosexual when students discuss problems in intimate relationships.

"I think 95 percent of counselors don't know beans about how to deal with kids who are indecisive [about sexual identity] or who are gay/lesbian identified," said Brown. "Counselors should have more sensitivity in terms of our language. We don't learn about this in graduate school. People have to deal with their own issues."

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